Was al-Harith bin Kaladah the Source of the Prophet’s Medical Knowledge?

Authors: Khalid al-Khazarajî and Elias Kareem

First Composed: 3 September 1999[1]
Last Updated: 27 October 2011, version 0.50 (pre-release version)

Introduction

In the late 1990s a paper appeared on a Christian missionary website under the title “Embryology in the Qur’an”. Writing under the pen name of Lactantius, the author alleges that the descriptions of human prenatal development as mentioned in the Qur’an had been plagiarised from the writings of ancient Greek physicians, notably Galen. Such writings were alleged to have been transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) through one of his companions, al-Harith bin Kaladah (d. 634-5), who is said to have studied medicine at an old and noted medical school at Jundishapur (southern Persia) where instruction in all of the Greek disciplines could be obtained. Jundishapur is said to have played a critical role in the translation of Greek scholarship into Near Eastern languages and to have been the single most important channel by which Greek science passed to the Arabs. Al-Harith later came back to Arabia about the beginning of Islam and settled down at Ta’if. He is also said to have been sufficiently known for his care that the Prophet Muhammad referred sick people to him, and (according to some accounts) to have been consulted during the final illnesses of the last two of the Caliphs. Consequently, Lactantius establishes what he perceives to be a clear link between the Greek science taught to al-Harith bin Kaladah at Jundishapur and the medical knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad.

Introducing al-Harith bin Kaladah as an early graduate of Jundishapur, Lactantius writes:

> According to Muslim historians, especially Ibn Abi Usaybia and al-Qifti [37], the most celebrated early graduate of Jundishapur was a doctor named al Harith Ibn Kalada, who was an older contemporary of Muhammed. "He was born probably about the middle of the sixth century, at Ta'if, in the tribe of Banu Thaqif. He traveled through Yemen and then Persia where he received his education in the medical sciences at the great medical school of Jundi-Shapur and thus was intimately acquainted with the medical teachings of Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen." [38]
>
> He became famous partly as a result of a consultation with King Chosroes [39]. Later he became a companion of the Prophet Muhammed himself, and according to the Muslim medical traditions Muhammed actually sought medical advice from him [40]. He may even have been a relative of the Prophet and his "teachings undoubtedly influenced the latter" [i.e., Muhammed] [41]. "Such medical knowledge as Muhammed possessed, he may well have acquired from Haris bin Kalda [*sic*], an Arab, who is said to have left the desert for a while and gone to Jundi Shapur to study medicine...On his return Haris settled in Mecca and became the foremost physician of the Arabs of the desert. Whether he ever embraced Islam is uncertain, but this did not prevent the Prophet from sending his sick friends to consult him." [2]

---

[1] This paper is based on the unpublished work of Khalid al-Khazarajî (September 1999). This current version has been revised and expanded.

[2] Lactantius (1999, p. 14)

Lactantius concludes:

> So we have just the link we need to show how "The translations (into Syriac) of Sergius Ras el Ain, penetrated to Jandi-Shapur. During the first years of the 7th century [more likely the end of the sixth century], Harith ben Kalada studied medicine there and Muhammad owed to Harith a part of his medical knowledge. **Thus, with the one as well as the other, we easily recognize the traces of Greek (medicine)."** [44] To summarise: Sergius died about the time that Chosroes the Great began his reign, and may even have been employed by Chosroes to translate Galen from Greek into Syriac. Halfway through his reign Chosroes founded Jundishapur, where Galen's manuscripts must surely have been kept in translation. Towards the end of his reign he had an audience with Harith Ibn Kalada, who later became associated with Muhammed. [3]

Was al-Harith the source of the Prophet's medical knowledge? Did al-Harith study at Jundishapur? What type of medicine did al-Harith practice? We propose here to shed light on the issues raised by Lactantius.

The Medical School of Jundishapur

It is generally believed that al-Harith was a graduate of the medical academy at Jundishapur (southern Persia) but the existence of such an old and noted medical school connected with Jundishapur has recently been called into question by a number of scholars. Lindberg in *The Beginnings of Western Science* recounts the "often-repeated legend":

> An influential mythology has developed around Nestorian activity in the city of Gondeshapur (often written "Jundishapur") in south-western Persia. According to the often-repeated legend, the Nestorians turned Gondeshapur into a major intellectual center by the sixth century, establishing what some enthusiasts have chosen to call a university, where instruction in all of the Greek disciplines could be obtained. It is alleged that Gondeshapur had a medical school, with a curriculum based on Alexandrian textbooks, and a hospital modeled on Byzantine hospitals, which kept the realm supplied with physicians trained in Greek medicine. **Of greatest importance, Gondeshapur is held to have played a critical role in the translation of Greek scholarship into Near Eastern languages and, indeed, to have been the single most important channel by which Greek science passed to the Arabs.**
>
> **Recent research has revealed a considerably less dramatic reality. We have no persuasive evidence for the existence of a medical school or a hospital at Gondeshapur,** although, there seems to have been a theological school and perhaps an attached infirmary. No doubt Gondeshapur was the scene of serious intellectual endeavour and a certain amount of medical practice —it supplied a string of physicians for the 'Abbasid court at Baghdad beginning in the eighth century— but it is doubtful that it ever became a major center of medical education or of translating activity. If the story of Gondeshapur is unreliable in its details, the lesson it was meant to teach is nonetheless valid."[4]

Porter, while acknowledging Jundishapur as an intellectual meeting place and crossroads for scholars of various backgrounds, also casts doubt on whether a medical school actually existed there. Porter in *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* states:

> It is often held that a distinctive Arab–Islamic medicine dates from the time of the Prophet and stems from a hospital (bimaristan: Persian for house for the sick) and academy at Jundishapur, near Susa in southern Persia. Jundishapur was certainly a

[3] Lactantius (1999, p. 14)

[4] Lindberg (1992, pp. 164-165).

meeting-place for Arab, Greek, Syriac and Jewish intellectuals, but **there is no evidence that any medical academy existed there.** **Only in the early ninth century did Arab–Islamic learned medicine take shape.** The first phase of this revival lay in a major translation movement, arising during the reign of Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809) and gaining impetus in the caliphate of his son, al-Ma'mum (r. 813-33). It was stimulated by a socioeconomic atmosphere favourable to the pursuit of scholarship, a perceived need among both Muslims and Christians for access in Arabic to ancient medicine, and the ready availability of the relevant texts.[5]

Regarding the presumed medical school of Jundishapur, Saliba states in his review of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*[6]:

> Before reviewing the entries dealing with medicine, I would like to make some general remarks about the presumed medical school of Jundishapur, for the existence of this school and the hospital that was supposed to have been attached to it, as well as the academy in the same city, have all been repeated in the sources, and are referred to more than once in this encyclopedia as well. Put briefly, the city of Jundishapur was supposed to have been founded by the Sasanian king Shapur I (241-71), who settled it with prisoners of war taken in his victory over Emperor Valerian. Later on, the same Sasanian king is supposed to have married the daughter of the Roman emperor Aurelian whose retinue was said to have included two Greek physicians, who in turn were to introduce Greek medicine into the city. Shapur II (309-79) is reputed to have enlarged the city and to have founded an academy. Some even go so far as to say that he also founded an observatory, a hospital and a school of theology. Later on, Greek philosophers escaping the wrath of Justinian after the closure of the Neoplatonic academy in Athens in 529 were supposed to have migrated to Jundishapur and to have brought with them Greek learning in all its forms. Throughout the pre- Islamic period the city is thought to have become a meeting place for Greek and Indo/Persian learning and continued to function as such well into the early Islamic centuries when it finally made its decisive mark on the nascent Islamic civilization by exporting to the Abbasid court, towards the middle of the eighth century, the most famous family of physicians to have come out of that city, namely the BOḴTĪŠŪʿ. From then on the city, with all its institutions, is supposed to have fallen into oblivion and nothing is heard about it thereafter, except in geographers' reports bemoaning its demise.
>
> **This story, despite its widespread currency in medieval and modern sources, is essentially ahistorical.** The reports regarding the institutions affiliated with this city — the school, the hospital, and the academy— despite their frequency in later medieval sources, are unique to the city of Jundishapur. It is in this context that I would like to raise the following cautionary remarks. First, it is quite unlikely that Jundishapur would be the only city in the Sasanian or Byzantine empires to maintain a school and a hospital, let alone an academy, for hundreds of years. Second, all the references to the hospital in that city and to the academy/school are of such late dates that their credibility cannot be accepted without a much more critical assessment. Third, if there were such a school/academy and a hospital at Jundishapur, and if all these institutions were a carry-over from late antiquity as legend maintains, why then didn't they make their mark during the first hundred years of Islam, and only began to exert an influence during the early part of the Abbasid reign? It is impossible to believe that such cultural institutions could be restricted for almost a century during Islamic times and many more prior centuries in the Sasanian period and only then emerge to exert their influence on other cities and other institutions. It is simply not credible. Fourth, the mere association of Mani[7] with the hospital or academy in that city, as reported by Firdawsi, is, in the opinion of this author more fiction than reality, and little should be made of it in terms of confirming the existence of such a hospital or the lack thereof. **Finally, the main features of the legend sound very much like an attempt to try to explain the**

[5] Porter (1997, p. 94).

[6] Shahbazi and Richter-Bernburg (2002).

[7] Mani was a religious preacher and the founder of Manichaeism. Born in western Persia (approximately 210-275 CE).

> **motivation for the transfer of science from Hellenistic civilization to the world of Islam, and to pinpoint the means by which this transfer took place.** We should recall here that the Syrian city of Harran, with its own wealth of stories regarding star-worshipping pagans and the like, plays a similar role in the historiography of science and is also a late attempt to explain the route and means by which Greek science was incorporated by Islam.
>
> This does not mean that there were no institutions to care for the sick and the poor in pre-Islamic Persia or during early Islamic times. But the doubts I am raising concern the nature of such institutions. The most likely story is that the later institution of the BĪMĀRESTĀN, as it developed mainly in Baghdad during Abbasid times, was a novel idea that may have only been inspired by similar practices that had taken place in previous times both in Iran and in the Byzantine empire and itself was not a natural progression from those institutions. Finally**, much more research needs to be done regarding the intellectual legacy of Jundishapur before it can be used as a source for later intellectual or institutional legacies.**[8]

It is evident that the history and the importance of Jundishapur as a medical centre is uncertain. Prioreschi in *A History of Medicine* points out that there are no Persian sources that support the claim that Jundishapur played such an important role in the history of medicine. [9] In fact specific mention of Jundishapur does not seem to occur until Ibn Qifti (d. 1248)[10] ; the legend of Jundishapur appears to have been based on the statement of Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286):

> It would appear that the legend of Jundishapur is based on the thirteenth century testimony of Barhebraeus, who states that a Roman emperor sent eminent Greek physicians to Persia in the retinue of his daughter, who was to marry Shapur I[11]. Although Barhebraeus himself does not mention a school, it was added later that the physicians then established a school in newly-built Jundishapur.
>
> On the other hand, Jundishapur, as mentioned above, seems to have achieved considerable reputation as a medical school by the end of the Umayyad caliphate (661-750). This is shown by the story reported by al-Jahiz (c. 840) about a starving Muslim physician in early ninth-century Baghdad who had no patients because, as al-Jahiz explains, he was not a clearly recognizable physician from Jundishapur: he had a non-Christian name, he wore a white cotton cloak instead of black silk and he did not speak the language of Jundishapur. These facts, however, tell us nothing about its academic history, nor do they tell us what the Arabs found there, that is to say, what kind of school and what kind of hospital.
>
> It seems, in fact, that in the sixth century, there was a (Nestorian) medical school in Jundishapur, even if the date of its origin and its role in the transmission of medical knowledge to the Arab world are not what they sometimes have been assumed to be. For the evidence for the school's early years, our best source is perhaps the continuator of Zacharias Rhetor's "Ecclesiastical History," who cannot have written very long after the events he describes. The author states that, on the advice of Christian doctors at his court, and "because of his compassion towards Christian captives and the chaste ones," Chosroes I (regnabat 531-579) built a hospital and provided it with twelve doctors. There is no reference to a pre-existing Nestorian hospital, or to a medical school other than Nisibis (from which one of the court physicians had come). [12]

Prioreschi concludes:

---

[8] Saliba (1998, pp. 688-689).

[9] Prioreschi (2001, p. 369).

[10] Hawting (1989, p. 137).

[11] Ardashir founded the New Persian Empire and the Sassanid Dynasty in 227 AD. His son and successor was Shapur I (241-271 CE).

[12] Prioreschi (2001, pp. 369-370).

> From the above it is evident that the history and the importance of Jundishapur as a medical center is not clear. It would appear that, although there was probably a hospital (or at least an infirmary) in the sixth century, there is no evidence of a major medical school in either the sixth or the seventh century. [13]

The medical school of Jundishapur only achieved its reputation in the late Umayyad period:

> As we have seen, however, the medical school of Jundishapur had achieved a reputation by the end of the Umayyad caliphate, that is, in the first half of the eighth century. This suggests that the school must have been operating in the eighth century. The most firm evidence for this is a letter that Timothy, the Syriac patriarch from 780 to 823 AD, sent to Sergius, Metropolitan of Elam, in whose province Jundishapur was, concerning a young man who wanted to be a doctor:
>
>> I have also sent you another youth for education, that is our Gabriel, for he too is very eager for the craft of medicine. So, hand him over to Zistq [?] and his establishment of education
>
> In addition, a few years later, Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari, in his *Paradise of Wisdom*, (written in 850), in the section on miscarriage and on the easing of delivery, wrote:
>
>> The director of the hospital in Jundishapur (*rais bimaristan Jundi-Shabur*) told me about a family in al-Ahwaz who possess a stone that protects the fetus if it's hung on the pregnant woman.
>
> The last quote is a confirmation of the existence of an Islamic hospital in Jundishapur in the first half of the ninth century. We have seen above, however, that a hospital, or at least an infirmary, was established in the city, by the Persian king Chosroes I, about three hundred years before. [14]

Al-Harith was said to have studied medicine at Jundishapur[15] during the first years of the seventh century[16]. Al-Harith acquired great fame, and according to some late sources[17] was allegedly called to the court of Chosroes with whom he had a long conversation. The problem with such reports is that Chosroes is known to have died in 579 CE (i.e. sixth century) yet al-Harith is reported to have been called to the court of Chosroes in the early seventh century after having completed his studies at Jundishapur! Horden notes:

> "from that period [the sixth and seventh century] it [Jundishapur] has no pupils – not even Al-Harit, a historical figure whom legend yet contrives to portray, both as a contemporary of the Prophet, and as a contemporary of Chosroes who disputed with the Shah the theory of humoral pathology.[18] For not even in legend did Al-Harit study at Gondeshapur…"[19]

The accounts of al-Harith bin Kaladah were it seems elaborated over time. What we know today is that they contain a number of conflicting elements while his personality is surrounded by a multitude of legends.

---

[13] Prioreschi (2001, pp. 371-372).

[14] Prioreschi (2001, pp. 372 - 373).

[15] Pellat (1982, p. 354).

[16] "During the first years of the 7th century [Lactantius' comment: more likely the end of the sixth century], Harith ben Kalada studied medicine there [Jundishapur]..." L. LeClerc, *Histoire de la Medecine Arabe* (Burt Franklin, New York; originally published in Paris, 1876) vol. I, p. 123, as cited by Lactantius.

[17] Pellat (1982, p. 354).

[18] The thesis that disorders in the fluids of the body, especially the blood, are the basic factors in disease.

[19] Peregrine Horden, *"The Nestorians, Gondeshapur, and Islamic Medicine: a Sceptical Comment,"* 1983. Presented at the Summer Conference of the Society for the Social History of Medicine in Oxford in May 1985 as quoted in Prioreschi (2001, p. 372 footnote 611).

The Problems with the Biographies of al-Harith

Al-Harith bin Kaladah was one of the physicians who lived in the early days of Islam. He was from a place called al-Ta'if, which came in direct contact with Islam in the eighth year of the Islamic calendar. Al-Harith was said to have been a lute-player before studying medicine at Jundishapur[20] during the first years of the seventh century.[21] He acquired great fame, and according to some late sources[22] was allegedly called to the court of Chosroes with whom he had a long conversation which is preserved in the form of a treatise by Haytham bin ‘Adi and is also reported by Ibn Abi Usaybi’a, but the authenticity of these reports are doubted.[23] What is known today is that the accounts of al-Harith bin Kaladah were elaborated over time to the extent that they now include conflicting elements making it difficult to assess the historical figure:

> One discerns that, if the historical existence of the “physician of the Arabs” cannot be put in doubt, his personality is surrounded by a host of legends which have secured a foothold in the historical and biographical literature and which make very difficult all attempts to disentangle the true from the false.[24]

Historians have generally accepted the biographies of al-Harith as given by Ibn Qifti (d. 1248) and Ibn Abi Usaybi’a (d. 1270) as credible, however:

> Given that the *sira*[25] tradition can be traced back considerably earlier than the biographies of doctors type of literature, it seems clear that generally, the biography of al-Harith in the latter genre is the result of the gradual elaboration of material, only some of which was available when the biography of the Prophet was taking on its earliest form. In spite of this, historians of medicine have tended to be fairly credulous about the biographies of al-Harith given by Ibn al-Qifti, Ibn Abi Usaybi’a, and others[26], some going so far as to credit the Prophet’s own knowledge of medicine (as witnessed in the “prophetic medicine” literature!) to the influence of al-Harith ibn Kalada.[27]

Furthermore:

> ...starting from the position that the more or less elaborate biographies of al-Harith are not likely to be based on much solid historical information (note that, if all the material is accepted, **he lived long enough to enjoy a scholarly discussion with Khusraw Anushirwan who died in 579, and to be consulted by the caliph Mu’awiya[28] who died in 680)**[29]

It is unlikely that the biographies of al-Harith are based on solid historical information.

---

[20] Pellat (1982, p. 354).

[21] L. LeClerc, *Histoire de la Medecine Arabe* (Burt Franklin, New York; originally published in Paris, 1876) vol. I, p. 123, as cited by Lactantius.

[22] Pellat (1982, p. 354).

[23] Siddiqi (1959, p. 6).

[24] Pellat (1982, p. 355).

[25] i.e. biographies of the Prophet Muhammad.

[26] Lucien Leclerc, *Histoire de la Medecine Arabe* (Paris, 1876), I, 28; E.G. Browne, Arabian Medicine, pp. 10-11, as citied by Hawting (1989, p. 132).

[27] Hawting (1989, p. 132).

[28] Ibn Qifti and Ibn Abi Usaybi’a say that Harith bin Kalada lived till the time of My’awiya (*Ta’rikhu’l-Hujama*, p, 161, *Tabaqatu’l Atibba*, Vol, 1, p. 100) as cited in Siddiqi (1959, p. 7 footnote 2).

[29] Hawting (1989, p. 132).

The Time and the Place

Al-Harith bin Kaladah was from al-Ta'if, a place that came into direct contact with Islam only in the eighth year of the Islamic calendar after the conquest of Mecca and the event of Hunain (630 CE). This date is important because on that date the people of al-Ta'if and al-Harith bin Kaladah first entered the scene of Islamic history. According to some reports, it was on the month of Shawwal in the eighth year of Hijrah when al-Ta'if was besieged by the Muslims for around twenty days. **Such a date would mean that almost all of the Qur'anic chapters and verses – including the verses that speak of fetal development[30] – had already been revealed by the time al-Tai'f was captured**. How then could al-Harith be the source of the Qur'anic verses on fetal development? And how could the Prophet Muhammad owe much of his medical knowledge to a man whom he did not meet until the last year(s) of his life? The implication of such a late date invalidates most of the arguments raised by Lactantius.

The first reference to al-Harith occurs in connection with the Prophet freeing a number of slaves from the town of al-Ta'if. When the Muslims besieged the town, a number of its slaves accepted the Prophet's offer of freedom: leave al-Ta'if, join the Muslims and accept Islam. Several of those who accepted this offer are named, and one or two of them are linked with al-Harith, we are told that they were slaves of his. Furthermore, when the town finally submitted to the Prophet, a number of its citizens complained to him about the material loss they had suffered as a result of the emancipation of their slaves; they asked for the slaves to be returned but the Prophet refused. Al-Harith bin Kaladah is mentioned by Ibn al-Qifti as one of those who spoke to the Prophet in vain.[31] In *Usud al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifat as-Sahabah*[32] of Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), a book that deals with *`ilm al-rijāl*[33] (literally "knowledge of men"), the entry for "al-Harith bin Kaladah" notes this event:

> **AL-HARITH IBN KALADAH IBN `AMR IBN `ILAJ IBN ABI SALAMAH IBN `ABD AL-`UZZA IBN GHAYRAH IBN `AWF IBN THAQIF ATH-THAQAFI.**
>
> He is the physician of the Arabs and the owner of Abû Bakrah. There is disagreement regarding his companionship. Ibn Ishâq narrated from whom he trusts on the authority of `Abd Allâh Ibn Mukaddam reporting from a man from Thaqîf - [where al-Harith lived] his saying: "When the people of al-Tâ'if embraced Islam, some people among them spoke of those slaves i.e. those who fled to the Messenger of Allâh -peace be upon him- when he besieged al-Tâ'if and embraced Islam, among them was Abû Bakrah." He said: "The Messenger of Allâh -peace be upon him- said: 'Those were freed by

---

[30] Qur'an (23: 12-16). This Surah (chapter) was revealed during the middle stage of the Prophet's residence at Makkah according to Ibn Kathir, al-Baghawi, and al-Qurtubi. Al-Qurtubi says that all of its verses were revealed in Makkah: مكية كلها في قول الجميع (al-Qurtubi) This means that these verses were revealed before the migration (hijrah) to Madinah. The conquest of Ta'if occurred after hijrah.

[31] Hawting (1989, p. 129).

[32] *Usud al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifat as-Sahabah;* أسد الغابة في معرفة الصحابة, ("The Lions of the Forest and the knowledge about the Companions") by Ibn Athir.

[33] "This branch of *hadith* studies is sometimes referred to as *'ilm al-rijal al-hadith*, and also *tabaqat al-ruwat* (classes of narrators), and *asma' al-rijal* (names of authorities). It is concerned mainly with biographical data, chronology, and life histories of *hadith* transmitters, their academic achievements, their teachers, their students, school of following, political leaning and views of other people concerning them. All information that has a bearing on reliability or otherwise of their narration of *hadith*, indeed any information that helps to explain and identify the personality of the *hadith* transmitter is of concern to this branch of *'ulum al- hadith*. Biographical data on *hadith* transmitters is also concerned with precise identification of the generation (*tabaqa*) and time frame in which *hadith* transmitters lived". (Kamali, 2005, p. 46). One of the major references in this field is *Usud al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifat as-Sahabah* by Ibn al-Athir.

Allâh.'"Among the people who spoke [to the Prophet] was al-Hârith Ibn Kaladah."[34]

The same report can be found in all major reference works dealing with the history of Islam and the conquest of al-Ta'if. What we have in these reports[35] is the first mention of the name al-Harith bin Kaladah and his tribe in connection with the spread of Islam. There is uncertainty as to whether al-Harith accepted Islam and any such reports are unauthenticated. This doubt is mentioned by Ibn Athir in *Usud al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifat as-Sahabah* as well as in *Al-Isabah fî Tamyiz al-Sahaba*[36] another work dealing with *`ilm al-rijāl*:

> Ibn Abi Hatem said; "He [al-Harith] is not accepted as a Muslim and this hadith proves that it is lawful to ask for help from *ahl al-Dhimmah* [non believers] in medicine".[37]

Ibn Qifti also doubts al-Harith"s conversion to Islam[38] and his companionship[39] with the Prophet is also said to be "disputed". According to Ibn al-Athir:

> He [al-Harith] is the physician of the Arabs and the owner of Abu Bakrah. There is disagreement regarding his companionship...[40]

There is also no evidence to suggest that the Prophet Muhammad himself actually sought any medical advice from al-Harith. The only evidence Lactantius is able to produce draws attention to al-Harith's role as a doctor, which shows that the Prophet himself recommended the use of medicines and the services of a doctor as in the case of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas:

> Ibn Ishaq narrated from Ismâ`îl Ibn Muhammad Ibn Sa`d Ibn Abî Waqqâs from his father his saying: Sa`d suffered from an illness while he was with the Messenger of Allâh - peace be upon him - in Hijjat al-Wadâ`. So the Prophet went to visit him and he told the Messenger of Allâh - peace be upon him "O Messenger of Allah! I think my illness will beat me." The Messenger of Allah - peace be upon him - replied "I hope that God will heal you so He might affect other people by you and others may benefit from you." Then he told al-Hârith Ibn Kaladah : "Cure Sa`d from his illness." Then he said : "By Allah, I hope he will be healed from (?) Do you have any of those `*ajwah* dates ?" He said : "Yes." So he made him a medicine from a mixture of dates and *hilbah* (a yellow grain) with fat and made him drink it. It was as if he was never ill. Narrated by Ibn Mandah and Abû Nu`aym.[41]

This report took place on *Hijjat al-Wada* (the Farewell Pilgrimage) just a few years after the conquest of al-Ta'if, during the last year of the Prophet's life. By that time, almost all of the Qur'an had already been revealed. How could it be said that the Prophet owed much of his medical knowledge to a man whom he did not meet until the last year(s) of his life?

---

[34] Ibn al-Athir (1993, p. 469).

[35] These reports are also widely cited sources of the event of al-Ta'if which took places a couple of years before the death of the Prophet.

[36] *Al-Isaba fi Tamyiz al-Sahaba;* الإصابة في تمييز الصحابة, ("*Finding the Truth in Judging the Companions*") by Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani. The most widely-used dictionary of Companions.

[37] Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (n.d.).

[38] Hawting (1989, p. 128).

[39] "Arabic *Sahaabah* or *Ashaab* (singular: *Sahaabee*). With respect to the Sharee'ah definition of a Sahaabee or Companion then Al-Haafidh Ibn al-Hajr said: 'The most correct of what I have come across is that a Sahaabee is one who met the Prophet (sallallahu alaihi wa sallam) whilst believing in him, and died as a Muslim. So that includes the one who remained with him for a long time or a short time, and those who narrated from him and those who did not and those who saw him but did not sit with him and those who could not see him due to blindness.' Al-Isaabah of lbn Hajr (1/4-5)." (Ibn Hanbal, pp. 8-9)

[40] Ibn al-Athir (1993, p. 469).

[41] Ibn al-Athir (1993, p. 469).

The Medicine of al-Harith

Citing Siddiq's *Studies in Arabic and Persian Medical Literature* as evidence, Lactantius makes the following claims about al-Harith[42]:

> **"**He was born probably about the middle of the **sixth century**, at Ta'if, in the tribe of Banu Thaqif. He traveled [sic] through Yemen and then Persia where he received his education in the medical sciences at the great medical school of **Jundi-Shapur and thus was intimately acquainted with the medical teachings of Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen**.**"** [38]
>
> [38] M. Z. Siddiqi (Calcutta University, 1959) Studies in Arabic and Persian Medical Literature, p. 6-7

But this citation must surely be a fabrication on the part of Lactantius! Compare the citation above with the following extract taken from Siddiqi's *Studies in Arabic and Persian Medical Literature*:

> "He was born probably about the middle of the **fifth century**[43], at Ta'if, in the tribe of Banu Thaqif. He traveled [sic] through Yaman and Persia where he learnt Music and received his education in the medical science in the great medical school of **Jundishapur**. Having completed his studies he practised as a physician in Persia and made much money by means of his profession. During this time he was called to the court of king Chosroes, with whom he had a long conversation. He came back to Arabia about the beginning of Islam and settled down at Ta'if, where Abu'l-Khayr, a king of Yaman, came to see him, in connection with a certain disease from which he was suffering and, on being cured, rewarded him with much money and a slave girl. He died in the reign of 'Umar the 2nd Caliph."[44]

Where is Siddiqi's statement that al-Harith was **" intimately acquainted with the medical teachings of Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen"!?**

The most Siddiqi concludes regarding al-Harith is his acquaintance with the Hippocratic system of medicine[45] yet this conclusion is based on al-Harith's supposed medical instruction at Jundishapur and on his alleged conversation with Chosroes. However, as we have seen above, there appears to be no evidence of any major medical school at Jundishapur in either the sixth or seventh century. The connection between Jundishapur and al-Harith is not supported by any reliable evidence and should be rejected.

Although documents concerning medicine in pre-Islamic Arabic are rare, there is evidence of the usual folk medicine, a mixture of "magic" and crude remedies often being practiced.

> From the pre-Islamic to the early Islamic period there were no significant changes in the practice of medicine. The Koran does not mention medicine and early medical practices are described in Hadith... all [Hadith collections] have their own chapter on medical teaching and recommendations (*Kitab at-Tibb*, that is, "Chapter" or "Book of Medicine"). These collections are our main sources of information about early Islamic medicine.
>
> In these documents we find that such medicine continued to be practiced for some time, Camel urine and milk were common remedies, various vegetable products (e.g. henna, olive oil) and other animal products (e.g. sheep fat, honey) were also

[42] Lactantius (1999, p. 14)

[43] This date appears to be an error by Siddiqi. Al-Harith was born in the sixth century, yet Lactantius makes an unexplained alteration to Siddiqi's text by changing "fifth century" to "sixth century".

[44] Siddiqi (1959, pp. 6-7).

[45] Siddiqi (1959, p. 7).

considered effective. Wine was forbidden, even for medicinal use. The poet Labid mentions boiled urine given to a sick person, in fact, camel urine may have been a very common remedy and human urine was used to treat camels.

> In them [i.e., the camels] are infections of the plague of violent cough, and buboes with pustules sharp and prominent like the nipples of breasts of young maidens. They suffer from mange, and they have been anointed all over with *ghalqah*, a stinking ointment, and the urine of women whose monthly courses have ceased.

As for surgery, although cauterization was less used than cupping, both procedures seem to have been the most common surgical techniques. Supernatural and magic explanations of diseases were still mentioned, for example, epilepsy was considered the result of demons entering the body, and the plague the result of the sting of a *jinni* (a spirit, often malevolent). Magic spells as remedies were usually prohibited except in special cases (e.g., snake or scorpion sting).[46]

As Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) observes in his famous *al-Muqaddimah*[47], the pre-Islamic Arabs used a type of folk medicine based on herbs and plants tested by experience and handed down. Ibn Khaldun classifies al-Harith bin Kaladah's medicine as traditional Arab folk medicine:

> Civilized Bedouins have a kind of medicine which is mainly based upon individual experience. They inherit its use from the *shaykhs*[48] and old women of the tribe. Some of it may occasionally be correct. However, (that kind of medicine) is not based upon any natural norm or upon any conformity (of the treatment) to temper the humors. Much of this sort of medicine existed among the Arabs. They had well-known physicians, such as al-Harith b. Kaladah and others.
>
> The medicine mentioned in religious tradition is of the (Bedouin) type. It is in no way part of the divine revelation. (Such medical matters) were merely (part of) Arab custom and happened to be mentioned in connection with the circumstances of the Prophet, like other things that were customary in his generation.[49]

Al-Harith bin Kaladah is acknowledged as a Bedouin physician whose practice of medicine was not based on the knowledge of the "natural norms" or on the "humors" - the terms usually associated with Greek medicine. His art was free from scientific obscurities and complications.

When al-Harith treated the sick Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, the treatment described involved the use of dates. This underlines the character of al-Harith: an Arab doctor whose medicine was simple, commonsensical, and self-reliant[50], and free from scientific obscurities and complications. Al-Harith placed an onus on the individual to look after themselves by sensible diet and habits. All the therapies that he apparently advocated reflect traditional practices of using locally available plants. All of these are characteristic of Prophetic medicine – the medical ideas and treatments followed by the Prophet. The failure of the authorities to send any medical aid to a Muslim army when an epidemic broke out in their

---

[46] Prioreschi (2001, pp. 205-206).

[47] The *Muqaddimah*, often translated as "Introduction" or "Prolegomenon," is the most important Islamic history of the premodern world. Written by the great fourteenth-century Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun, this monumental work laid down the foundations of several fields of knowledge, including philosophy of history, sociology, ethnography, and economics.

[48] i.e. the elders of the tribe.

[49] Ibn Khaldūn (1958, p. 150).

[50] An example of al-Harith's medical remedy: "So he [Hairth] made him a medicine from a mixture of dates and *hilbah* (a yellow grain) with fat and made him drink it. It was as if he was never ill." Narrated by Ibn Mandah and Abû Nu`aym. (see Ibn al-Athir, 1993, p. 469).

camp in Syria, and the treatment of the death-wound of Umar the second Caliph with milk and wine[51] also shows that the medicine of the Arabs during this period had no scientific basis.[52] Thus the medicine of al-Harith bin Kaladah and that found in the Prophetic medicine reflect traditional practices rather than the Hellenistic tradition generally associated with Jundishapur.

Conclusion

The existence of an old and noted medical school connected with Jundishapur has recently been called into question by a number of scholars casting doubt on whether such a medical school actually ever existed there. The connection between Jundishapur and al-Harith is also not supported by any reliable evidence and should be considered a legend. The accounts of al-Harith bin Kaladah were it seems elaborated over time to the extent that they now include conflicting elements. His personality is surrounded by a host of legends which have secured a foothold in both historical and biographical literature.[53] The medicine of al-Harith bin Kaladah and that found in the Prophetic medicine reflect traditional practices rather than the Hellenistic tradition generally associated with Jundishapur. Moreover, the Qur'anic verses dealing with human prenatal development cannot be attributed to al-Harith bin Kaladah as these verses were revealed long before al-Harith came into contact with Islam during the last year(s) of the Prophet's life.

Bibliography

al-Khazarajî, Khalid (1999). *Al-Harith Bin Kaladah - A Source of Muhammad's Medical Knowledge*. www.islamic-awareness.org. Unpublished work.

al-Qurtubi, Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Ansari. *Tafseer al-Qurtubi:* تفسير القرطبي Retrieved 20/10/2011, from http://www.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?idfrom=2413&idto=2467&bk_no=48&ID=1849

Hawting, G. R. (1989). *Development of the Biography of al-Harith ibn Kalada and the Relationship between Medicine and Islam*. In C. E. Bosworth, Charles Issawi, Roger Savory & A. L. Udovitch (Eds.), *The Islamic World, from Classical to Modern Times* (pp. 127-137). Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc.

Ibn al-Athir. (1993). *Usud al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifat as-Sahabah:* أسد الغابة في معرفة الصحابة (Vol. 1). Beruit: Dar al-Fikr.

Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani. (n.d.). *Al-Isaba fi Tamyiz al-Sahaba*: الإصابة في تمييز الصحابة, *Makhtabat al-Hadîth ash-Sharîf* (CD-ROM Edition 2 ed.). Beirut: Ariss Computer Company.

Ibn Hanbal, Ahmed. *Foundation of the Sunnah* Retrieved 01/10/2011, from http://www.planetaislam.com/media/usool-us-sunnah%28english%29.pdf

---

[51] *Annals of al-Tabari,* series 1, Vol. 1. 5, p. 725 as quoted in Siddiqi (1959, p. 9).

[52] Siddiqi (1959, p. 9).

[53] "For similar reasons, it is difficult to determine the authenticity of reports regarding Ibn Abī Rimtha, who was supposed to have been a contemporary of the Prophet and to have practised surgery." (Savage-Smith, Klein-Franke, & Ming)

Ibn Khaldūn. (1958). *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Franz Rosenthal, Trans.). London: Routledge & K. Paul.

Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. (2005). *A Textbook of Hadith Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Hadith*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.

Lactantius. (1999). *Embryology in the Qur'an.* Retrieved 20 August 2011, from Answering Islam Website.

Lindberg, David C. (1992). *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, Prehistory to A.D. 1450*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Pellat, Ch. (1982). al-ḤĀRIT͟H b. Kalada b.ʿAmr b. ʿIlād͟jal-T͟haḳafī *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Volume XII* (2nd ed., pp. 354 -355). Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Porter, Roy. (1997). *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind : A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present*. London: Harper Collins.

Prioreschi, Plinio. (2001). *A History of Medicine* (2nd ed. Vol. IV - Byzantine and Islamic Medicine). Omaha: Horatius press.

Saliba, George. (1998). A Review of the "Encyclopaedia Iranica". *Iranian Studies, vol 31*(numbers 3/4, Summer-Autumn 1998), pp. 681-690.

Savage-Smith, Emilie, Klein-Franke, F, & Ming, Zhu. "Ṭibb (a.)." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.* Retrieved 28 August 2011, from http://www.encislam.brill.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1216

Shahbazi, A. Shapur, & Richter-Bernburg, Lutz (2002, 15 December 2002). "Gondēšāpur". *Encyclopaedia Iranica, Online Edition.* Retrieved 11 August 2011, from http://www.iranica.com/articles/gondesapur

Siddiqi, Muhammad Zubayr (1959). *Studies in Arabic and Persian Medical Literature*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.